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07 December 2018

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Hutchison, Gary D. (2018) 'Wigtown Burghs, 1832–1868 : a rotten Burgh District?', Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society., 91 . pp. 93-104.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.dgnhas.org.uk/tdgnhasinfo>

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Wigtown Burghs, 1832–1868: A Rotten Burgh District?

Gary D. Hutchison¹

The existence of corrupt ‘rotten boroughs’ in England is a well-documented phenomenon before the ‘Great’ Reform Act of 1832.² Similarly, many Scottish constituencies possessed characteristics which made them particularly closed, even by the limited standards of the pre-Reform political system.³ The Wigtown District of Burghs, (hereafter the Wigtown Burghs), which was entirely controlled by a number of prominent local families, was one of these. By using its politics after 1832 as a case-study, it is possible to question how far the Scottish Reform Act went in creating a more open and democratic political culture.⁴ Moreover, it raises the possibility that the political culture of non-contiguous Burgh Districts, which were unique to Scotland, possessed characteristics which set them apart from other types of constituency.

Through an examination of the Wigtown Burghs between the First and Second Reform Acts, it can be demonstrated that many of the features of pre-Reform Wigtown politics survived, and that the representation of the Wigtown Burghs in fact remained under the control of landed magnates until the late-nineteenth century. As such, the extent to which the Wigtown Burghs remained a ‘rotten burgh’ can be established. This can be done through an examination of the MPs who sat for the constituency in this period, and of the unsuccessful candidates. Moreover, the continuing but changeable influence of powerful local families can be exposed. The practices and culture of electioneering also revealed the political character of local politics, and, finally, the increasing role played by local constituency parties contributes to the understanding of local electoral politics. Before these can be examined, however, it is necessary to explore the history and character of the constituency.

CONSTITUENCY BACKGROUND

The Wigtown Burghs, both before and after 1832, was a non-contiguous burgh constituency, covering the Royal Burghs of Wigtown, Whithorn, Stranraer, and New Galloway. Before 1832, it was widely recognised to have been largely in the pocket of the Stewarts, earls of Galloway, whose influence prevailed in Wigtown and Whithorn. The Dalrymples, earls of Stair, prevailed at Stranraer, while at New Galloway influence was maintained by the Gordons of Kenmure.⁵ Each burgh chose one commissioner, a nominee of these families, who voted for the representation in parliament; in effect this meant that the constituency had only four voters. The four burghs presided in turn, and the vote of a presiding burgh in a tied election was decisive. This meant that, in certain circumstances, the combined power of the

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² See, for instance, O’Gorman (1989).

³ This is explored in Fry (1992).

⁴ The most comprehensive existing work on Scottish politics in this period is Hutchison (1986), 1–59.

⁵ *History of Parliament* [hereafter cited as *HoP*], 1754–1790, Wigtown Burghs, [<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/constituencies/wigtown-burghs>, accessed 25 Aug. 2016].

Dalrymples and Gordons could overcome the Stewarts if either Stranraer or New Galloway presided. Though the Wigtown Burghs were never entirely in the pocket of one interest, it was by no means an open constituency, even by the limited standards of the era. By the 1820s, the Stewart interest generally held sway over the constituency.⁶

Nevertheless, the (mostly non-voting) inhabitants of the towns displayed some independence, sending several petitions to Westminster in favour of the abolition of slavery and the reform of the electoral system in 1830 and 1831.⁷ In this respect, opinion in the constituency was similar to that in the rest of Scotland, as there was overwhelming support for Reform.⁸ The *Scotsman* could claim in 1834 that ‘even previous to Reform, an independent interest had arisen which broke in a little upon the ancient Tory quietude’, though it may well have been more pertinent that Lord Garlies, who was by then managing the Stewart interest, favoured both Reform and Whig principles.⁹ During negotiations over the redistribution of Scottish seats in the post-Reform parliament, the Wigtown Burghs came close to disfranchisement; even with an expanded franchise that would grant the vote to one in eight adult men, the population of the combined burghs was thought to contain only 279 potential electors.¹⁰ Though royal burghs, by the 1820s Wigtown and Stranraer were relatively small towns when compared to the rapidly expanding towns and cities of an industrialising Scotland. Whithorn consisted ‘almost entirely of one street’, and New Galloway was by then more village than town.¹¹ Various solutions were posited, including the addition of Port Glasgow to the group, and the addition of nearby Kirkcudbright.¹² With disenfranchisement looming, the boundary commissioners generously expanded the outer electoral limits of each town, ostensibly to allow for future urban expansion.¹³ Thus, with the addition of outlying rural lands, the ostensibly urban district became even more penetrated by rural interests associated with various local landowners.

The slightly altered Wigtown group thus entered the Reform era with an electorate of only 316 in 1832, even with these expanded boundaries. By 1865, this had expanded moderately to 518.¹⁴ In fact, the burgh of Stranraer had overtaken the principal burgh of Wigtown in population by 1837, with 4,000 inhabitants, compared to Wigtown’s 2,337. Whithorn had a population of 1,300, while New Galloway had only 1,128.¹⁵ By 1865, it was estimated that the combined population of the Group was ‘perhaps ... 15,000 inhabitants’.¹⁶ In comparison, the population of Dundee, which also returned one member to parliament, was 90,417 by 1861.¹⁷ The Wigtown Burghs was a particularly small constituency, even by the erratic standards of the post-Reform Scottish political landscape. This definitely contributed to the strong and continuing influence of local landowners in constituency affairs. Its survival as a

⁶ *HoP*, 1820–32, Wigtown Burghs, [http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/constituencies/wigtown-burghs, accessed 25 Aug. 2016].

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Pentland (2006), 103.

⁹ *Scotsman*, 20 Dec. 1834.

¹⁰ Hutchison (1986); *HoP*, 1820–32, Wigtown Burghs.

¹¹ *HoP*, 1820–32, Wigtown Burghs.

¹² Dyer (1996a), 29.

¹³ *HoP*, 1820–32, Wigtown Burghs.

¹⁴ Craig (1977), 563.

¹⁵ *Scotsman*, 5 Aug. 1837.

¹⁶ *Scotsman*, 7 Jul. 1865.

¹⁷ Vincent and Stenton (1971), 96.

separate seat was partly the result of successful Conservative and Whig efforts to keep urban voters in small towns out of county contests.¹⁸ With the Liberal-leaning electors of the burghs removed from the surrounding county constituency of Wigtownshire, it was thought that this would enable the Conservatives to maintain their hold on the rural seat.¹⁹

CONSTITUENCY MPS

The character and background of the MPs who represented the Group, as well as unsuccessful candidates, is in many ways indicative of the nature of local politics. Their background would appear to be closely linked to their positions on the political spectrum of Liberalism, between moderate Whiggism to uncompromising Radicalism. The themes of locality, patronage, landownership and influence, and family connection, all illustrate the extent to which the power of landed magnates remained central to local politics.

It is notable that the Group elected Liberal MPs to Westminster without interruption for the entire period in question. The first, Edward Stewart, sat from 1831 to 1835, beating Sir John McTaggart, also a Liberal, in 1832. McTaggart won the seat in 1835 after Stewart's withdrawal, holding the seat for twenty-two years until 1857. During this time, he saw off challenges from other Liberals – John Douglas in 1835, and Sir Andrew Agnew in 1837. In 1841, the first Conservative, Patrick Vans Agnew, unsuccessfully contested the seat. McTaggart won all other elections uncontested, with one notable exception. In 1852, the Conservatives put up James Caird, who lost to McTaggart by a single vote, 139 to 140. After McTaggart's resignation in 1859, the constituency was then represented for seven years by Sir William Dunbar, all of whose elections were uncontested. After Sir William's resignation in 1865, the seat was taken over, again uncontested, by George Young. Young did however have to see off a Conservative challenger in 1868, Robert Vans Agnew. Overall, the Wigtown Burghs saw twelve elections between 1832 and 1868, which included two by-elections. Of these, six, half of elections, were contested. Of the six contested elections, only two, in 1852 and 1868, took place after 1841. Also of note was the lacklustre Conservative presence in the constituency; during the whole 36-year period, only three Conservative candidates went to poll.²⁰

Candidates often stressed their locality in elections; it was considered to be advantageous if a politician originated in the local area. The *Dumfries Herald*, when urging Sir Andrew Agnew to stand for the Group in 1847, stated that 'We understand that a strong desire to be represented by one of their own townsmen prevails among the electors, and that a large number of them, including not a few of the present member's usual supporters...'. The paper stated that local voters were unhappy with having a relative outsider, McTaggart,

¹⁸ Dyer (1996b), 292.

¹⁹ It is generally accepted that the Liberal party did not come into formal existence until 1859, though the more recent work of Joseph Coohill (2011) has argued that the party (and Liberalism more generally) substantively coalesced decades earlier than this. The Conservative party, by contrast, is generally thought to have existed as a coherent entity before the middle years of the century, but was arguably split both in organisation and ideology by the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. For the sake of consistency, however, the parties and their creeds are capitalised regardless of their then-current state at different points between 1832 and 1868.

²⁰ All electoral data was sourced from Craig (1977).

representing their local interests. It was thought that Agnew might have an advantage as he was a 'citizen of one of the burghs [Wigtown], and connected by parentage with two of the others'.²¹ Moreover, in 1852 the Liberal-Conservative candidate, James Caird, was a native of Stranraer.²² He was also 'well known as the Times' agricultural commissioner, and a resident in that district'.²³ Indeed, George Young, in his 1865 election address, made much of the fact that 'It had ever been his pride to identify himself with Dumfries and Galloway – with the former as his place of birth, and with the latter as endeared by many early associations'.²⁴ Caird and Agnew were actually brought up within the burghs themselves. Moreover, they were brought up within the two most populous burghs, which effectively decided the results – Whithorn and New Galloway were electorally insignificant. Inter-burgh rivalry could play a major role in voting tallies, and as such it was necessary for candidates to navigate these political cross-currents.²⁵ However, it is notable that of these three men, the first two were not elected, and the last, Young, had the most tenuous association with the locality – though Dumfriesshire bordered Wigtownshire, it was not the same county, let alone within burgh limits. Young felt it necessary to speak at the hustings while surrounded by 'a large number of gentlemen connected with Wigtown, Whithorn, Stranraer, and New Galloway', in order to boost his local credentials.²⁶ While locality was an advantage to candidates, it was by no means decisive.

Perhaps more important was the ability of a candidate to procure patronage for the constituency; When Agnew's candidacy was urged in 1846, this was partly because local electors were 'anxious to induce a professional' to stand against McTaggart.²⁷ Moreover, when Sir William Dunbar was appointed a Lord Commissioner of the Treasury, the Provost of Whithorn asserted that 'We possess the services of a representative whose position is listened to in the House of Commons with respect, and which carries with it weight and influence'.²⁸ George Young's position as Solicitor-General for Scotland may well have been the main reason that he was invited to stand for the Group. Young certainly made sure to dwell on his ability to procure advantages for his prospective constituents: 'as one of the law officers for Scotland, I am connected with the present Government... in the expectation that in my present professional position I may be serviceable to you and the country in Parliament'.²⁹ The ability, or potential ability, to procure places for local electors was therefore a definite advantage in contesting the Wigtown Burghs.

Nevertheless, this was not the most common attribute of successful candidates – with the single exception of Young, all of the MPs for the Group were aristocratic gentlemen with significant land holdings in Wigtownshire, or were closely related to local landed magnates. The first post-Reform MP, Edward Stewart, was a grandson of the 7th Earl of Galloway, and a

²¹ *Dumfries Herald*, reproduced in *Scotsman*, 14 Jan. 1846.

²² G. E. Mingay, 'Caird, Sir James (1816–1892)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter ODNB], [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4339, accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

²³ *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 Mar. 1853.

²⁴ *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 Apr. 1865.

²⁵ Dyer (1996b), 291.

²⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 17 Apr. 1865.

²⁷ *Dumfries Herald*, reproduced in *Scotsman*, 14 Jan. 1846.

²⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 29 Jun. 1859.

²⁹ *The Times*, 12 Apr. 1865.

cousin of Lord Garlies, who by 1831 controlled the Stewart interest in the constituency.³⁰ Sir John McTaggart, in addition to representing the Wigtown Burghs, also possessed influence in them.³¹ His estate at Ardwell comprised 5,998 acres in 1883, valued at £7,537 a year.³² His successor, Sir William Dunbar, became a major landholder in the county when, in 1859, he 'purchased the estates of Grange and Tourhouskie' for £43,000.³³

Though a strong local connection was a preferable trait, it was patronage, and most importantly, landed connections which were the most prominent characteristics of MPs for the Wigtown Burghs. As such, the group generally elected candidates more suited to the espousal of rural, rather than urban, interests. This suggests that the local political culture was heavily influenced by the nature of the surrounding county, the wishes of local magnates, and the ability to procure benefits for electors.

ELECTIONS

In an 1844 survey, it was estimated that over half of the electorate in the Wigtown Burghs were tenants.³⁴ In the political age before the secret ballot, when every vote was publicly known, influence over tenants by their proprietors was therefore central to determining the outcome to electoral contests. This pattern of influence, was, however, neither monolithic nor static. Rather, different proprietors combined to make up a patchwork of overlapping influence networks, which were prone to change over time as estates were bought and sold, and local magnates changed.

The Gordons of Kenmure, who held the predominant influence over New Galloway at the beginning of the period, suffered from the death of John Gordon, 10th Viscount Kenmure, in 1840.³⁵ His only heir, Adam Gordon, died shortly after in 1847 without issue, resulting in the extinction of the viscountcy.³⁶ Despite this, the estates were inherited by his sister Louise, who managed to maintain their influence in New Galloway up to 1853 at least.³⁷ This may have been due to the very small number of electors residing in that burgh. The case of the Stewart family, the Earls of Galloway, also illustrates that influence was subject to change over time. Long dominant in the Wigtown Burghs, it was thought by the Conservative party in 1834 that 'Lord Galloway's interest predominates in this county'.³⁸ In 1837 however, it was clear that Lord Galloway wanted Agnew to be elected, yet he lost to McTaggart.³⁹ In 1852, the last concerted effort was made by the family to promote the candidacy of James

³⁰ *HoP*, 1820–1832, Edward Stewart, [<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/stewart-edward-1808-1875>, accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

³¹ Hanham (1972), 344.

³² Bateman (1883), 294.

³³ *Scotsman*, 13 Aug. 1859.

³⁴ Dyer (1996b), 35.

³⁵ *John Bull*, 26 Sep. 1840.

³⁶ *Stirling Observer*, 9 Sep. 1847.

³⁷ Hanham (1972), 344.

³⁸ 'Memorandum of the State of the Scotch Representation', Nov. 1834, Buccleuch MSS, GD224/582/2/21, National Records of Scotland [hereafter NRS].

³⁹ 'Memoranda', 6 Jul. 1837, Buccleuch MSS, GD224/582/2/25, NRS.

Caird, who was in fact a ‘tenant and protégé’ of the Stewarts.⁴⁰ Their interest was gradually eclipsed by that of another major family – the Dalrymples, Earls of Stair.

The Stewarts had greatly reduced their holdings in the local area by selling estates valued at £120,000 to the Dalrymples in 1840, who had had been steadily increasing their interest in the county: ‘Within the last twenty years his lordship has by himself, and as trustee for a former earl, made additions to the estates of Stair to the extent of above 400,000l’.⁴¹ They were also in the ascendant because their existing influence was concentrated at Stranraer, as that burgh had grown at a faster rate than the other three. The accession of John Hamilton Dalrymple to the earldom in 1840 proved to be auspicious for the family. Upon his accession, he immediately announced plans for an ambitious restoration of Castle Kennedy, earning much local praise.⁴² As he was a known Liberal, a dinner in his honour was proposed by the local Liberal electors, which he refused to countenance, ‘as I differ in my political views from most of the gentry around me ... [they might] misunderstand the spirit in which I had come among them, and a bar to our future friendly intercourse might thus be established’.⁴³ Despite this public snub, the *Caledonian Mercury* could nevertheless state that ‘No friend of the Liberal cause can fail to have been gratified at the succession of the present Earl of Stair to his title and estates, and at the reception which has greeted his arrival at his property, from all classes and ranks in the county of Wigtown’.⁴⁴

Later that same year, Lord Stair threw a lavish dinner for his tenants in Wigtownshire, inviting 400 guests, and made a speech in which he asserted that, when his tenants voted, they should ‘do so honestly and manfully – not allowing themselves to be dictated to by me, were I disposed to attempt it’.⁴⁵ By the December of that year, the Conservatives thought that ‘Lord Stair’s influence is now not so great as it promised to be’.⁴⁶ The extent to which Lord Stair stood by these wishes is questionable; after the hotly contested election of 1852, Caird asserted in a speech that ‘An attempt was made by strangers to bully and ride roughshod over the quiet and industrious people of Stranraer, and all this was boastingly done in the name of Lord Stair’.⁴⁷ The *Caledonian Mercury* went so far as to state that Sir John McTaggart was a ‘nominee of Lord Stair’, and that Caird’s defeat was due to the exertion of ‘all the influence of Lord Stair – [including] his bailiffs, factors, and land-agents’.⁴⁸ Even after the subsequent death of both the 8th and 9th earls, a supporter of George Young at the hustings still thought it necessary to refute accusations that ‘the learned gentleman, in coming forward for these burghs, was merely the nominee of a noble Lord at the other end of the county (Lord Stair)’.⁴⁹ Young himself stated vehemently that ‘I had no communication with or from Lord Stair, directly or indirectly, prior to my election, or for many months after... I don’t believe that I ever had five minutes conversation upon politics with Lord Stair in my life’.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ *Scotsman*, 3 Feb. 1859.

⁴¹ *John Bull*, 2 Aug. 1840. (Here 400,000l is £400,000).

⁴² *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 Apr. 1840. The castle was never restored, and is still a ruin today.

⁴³ *Morning Chronicle*, 29 Apr. 1840.

⁴⁴ *Caledonian Mercury*, 30 Apr. 1840.

⁴⁵ *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 Sep. 1840.

⁴⁶ Donald Home to Duke of Buccleuch, 14 Dec. 1840, Buccleuch MSS, GD224/581/14, NRS.

⁴⁷ *Morning Post*, 2 Oct. 1852.

⁴⁸ *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 Mar. 1853.

⁴⁹ *Dundee Courier and Argus*, 17 Apr. 1865.

⁵⁰ *Scotsman*, 15 Sep. 1868.

It is evident that the role of prominent landowning families played a significant, and perhaps even a central role in determining the outcome of elections in the Wigtown Burghs, despite frequent protestations to the contrary. What is also apparent, however, is that this influence was subject to change over time, and required extensive landholdings, careful diplomacy, and some personal popularity for it to have a marked effect. Influence was a largely top-down political phenomenon in the Wigtown Burghs, but there was an element of negotiation present.

The everyday practices of electioneering in the burghs are also a crucial element in uncovering the nature of local politics, and the extent to which the voters of the Wigtown Burghs were able to exert a degree of electoral independence. Focal points such as the hustings and nomination of candidates were important, as was the practice of canvassing voters. Similarly, the presence of features such as intimidation, offers of patronage, and outright bribery played a role. These all paint a mixed picture of local politics, one which contains elements of independence, influence, and coercion.

The hustings and nomination of candidates, long a common feature of English elections, would appear to have been a relatively novel event in the previously closed Scottish burghs. Indeed, the *Scotsman* commented that the local nomination meeting in 1832 was ‘rather a new thing in a Scottish Burgh’ – yet, despite the potential for ribald and participatory proceedings, it appeared that the first open contest was a ‘quiet election’.⁵¹ The low rate of contested elections meant that the nomination was merely a formality in half of all elections, greatly lessening the chance for excitement. This was the case in uncontested elections such as that of 1859, as described by the *Glasgow Herald*: ‘few persons were present, and there was no excitement of any kind’.⁵²

Nevertheless, even in seemingly uncontested elections this event could be a vehicle for popular participation in politics, even for those who did not possess the franchise – the audience at the hustings often comprised a majority of non-electors. In 1857 for instance, though he did not go forward to the poll, Austen Layard spoke at length at the hustings, to great effect. Layard was himself a well-travelled politician with an interesting past, having been an archaeologist, explorer, and diplomat.⁵³ In a speech described as ‘spirited and telling’, Layard used his formidable oratorical powers to, among other things, imply that his opponent Dunbar was a ‘jackass’, to the great delight of the audience.⁵⁴ This sort of hustings was, however, exceptional; it would appear that Wigtown Burgh politics did not have the vibrant hustings which were characteristic of many other constituencies.

One lively aspect that did feature in constituency politics was the intimidation of voters. In the aftermath of the fiercely fought election of 1852, numerous examples of the tactics used

⁵¹ *Scotsman*, 22 Dec. 1832.

⁵² *Glasgow Herald*, 29 Jun. 1859.

⁵³ Jonathan Parry, ‘Layard, Sir Austen Henry (1817–1894)’, *ODNB*, (2006) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16218>, accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

⁵⁴ *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 12 Apr. 1857.

by local party officials to corral votes were brought to light. One Mr. Galbraith, because he had not voted for McTaggart, found that his landlord had sold his property out from under him, and, moreover, that £300 in rent arrears had been called in.⁵⁵ This was, however, exceptional; the main mechanism by which the Liberal party garnered votes for their candidates was through the use of patronage, favours, and, on occasion, outright bribery.

The 1853 election brought to light more examples of positive coercion than of negative intimidation. Three voters, Andrew Wallace, John Macadam, and William Frazer, were persuaded to vote for McTaggart after they had been sold some sheep at a bargain price, netting them a profit of £10 – Macadam was said to have joked afterwards to Frazer that ‘he never knew the value of a vote’.⁵⁶ In a case of outright bribery, a Mr McGooch and his wife, who were in financial distress, were called on by an agent for McTaggart, who ‘offered them 1.6 or 1.7’.⁵⁷ Though this was a fairly isolated case, it does call into question the present scholarly consensus that bribery was almost non-existent in Scotland, in comparison to English elections.⁵⁸ William Irving, a mason, was promised by an employee of Lord Stair that he would be given work by the peer if he voted for McTaggart, and Mr. Ingram, one of McTaggart’s agents, offered a voter a better house if he voted for Sir John. A Mr. Ferguson was promised that if he voted for Sir John, then McTaggart would ‘make him landlord of the Ardwell Inn’.⁵⁹ However, voters were not entirely innocent and passive in this regard; knowing the monetary value of their vote, they often actively sought advantage by offering their allegiance. One instance was that of Henry Watt, whose brother had obtained employment at the Glasgow Customs House through Sir John’s patronage. He sent a letter to Sir John, in which he stated that ‘if he got the situation for his son, he should feel called upon to support him in future’.⁶⁰ Overall then, the most common method of garnering votes was through the promise of places, employment, or other emoluments. This suggests that the Wigtown Burghs was in many ways a venal constituency until at least the mid-nineteenth century.

PARTIES AND VOTERS

Though these traditional practices for garnering votes continued after 1832, the increased electorate, now comprising several hundred, complicated matters. While politics were still largely conducted on a personal level, it was now necessary to employ intermediaries and officials in order to maintain the complex system of patronage and favours which underpinned the Liberal hegemony. As such, though much of this work was done by the estate officials of local magnates, the part-time party agent increasingly came to the fore. Indeed, a newspaper hostile to James Caird blamed his defeat not on the use of sharp practices by McTaggart’s agents, but rather on the fact that ‘he had only one law agent throughout the contest, except on the day of the poll, and then his opponents had eight or nine’.⁶¹ Party agents and, therefore local party organisations, were increasingly in the ascendant as the nineteenth century progressed.

⁵⁵ *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 Mar. 1853.

⁵⁶ *Morning Post*, 11 Mar. 1853.

⁵⁷ *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 Mar. 1853.

⁵⁸ Fergusson (1947), 129.

⁵⁹ *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 Mar. 1853.

⁶⁰ *Morning Post*, 11 Mar. 1853.

⁶¹ *Morning Post*, 2 Oct. 1852.

One of the main functions of the newly powerful political parties was attending to the registration of voters. The decision of whether or not individuals owned enough property to qualify for the vote was decided in special registration courts, held each year.⁶² By attempting to get their own supporters added to the electoral roll, and objecting to the addition of those who supported the opposition, political parties were able to materially affect electoral outcomes. In the Wigtown Burghs, the first election after 1832 saw 411 new claims for the franchise lodged – 229 in Stranraer, 107 in Wigtown, 60 in Whithorn, and 15 in New Galloway. In that same year, there were objections made to 303 of these – around two-thirds of all claims.⁶³ This indicates that local parties were hard at work in building up favourable registers from the very beginning of the Reform era. This continued throughout the period – even in 1868, at the end of the period in question, it was reported in the *Scotsman* that the local Conservative and Liberal parties continued to battle each other in the Registration courts, though the strength of the parties was ‘not materially affected’ in that year.⁶⁴

Parties did not exist, of course, merely to win elections; rather, they were coalitions grouped around shared ideological principles. Though elections in the Wigtown Burghs may have owed more to influence of various kinds than to ideological allegiances, a section of voters nevertheless voted according to their ideological convictions. They did so overwhelmingly for the Liberal party. It is notable that each of the burgh members was consistently Liberal in inclination. Indeed, when George Young was first running to replace McTaggart, he asserted in his hustings speech that his ‘opinions...[were] identical...[to] those of every representative of the burghs since the passing of the Reform Act’.⁶⁵ However, each of the MPs were decidedly on the moderate Whig wing of the party – during the 1857 election, the other Liberal challenger, Layard, was considered to be a ‘man of the people’.⁶⁶ He lambasted Sir William Dunbar for prevaricating on many Radical issues: ‘His (Mr. Layard’s) position there [was] greatly dependent upon the principles his opponent professed, but for the life of him he could not understand what he meant’.⁶⁷ Though he received great cheers from the crowd, he withdrew when it became clear he did not have a chance of success. Thus, while the electors were Liberal in inclination, only a Liberal who could command patronage and the support of landed magnates that was certain of success.

Indeed, the depth of Liberal feeling in the Wigtown Burghs is illustrated by the fact that the closest a Conservative came to winning the seat, James Caird in 1853, was achieved because he was a Liberal-Conservative. Though he ran as a Conservative, he stated that, with regard to the Corn Laws, he acknowledged the ‘impolicy and impossibility of reverting to that now obsolete principle’.⁶⁸ Though formerly a Protectionist, he had by then converted to the policy of Free Trade, thus appealing to moderates across the spectrum.⁶⁹ A great many means were used to ensure Liberal victories. Public opinion was already generally in favour of that party

⁶² Ferguson, (1966), 49.

⁶³ *Scotsman*, 22 Sep. 1832.

⁶⁴ *Scotsman*, 9 Oct. 1868.

⁶⁵ *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 Apr. 1865.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Parry, ‘Layard, Sir Austen Henry (1817–1894)’, *ODNB*, (2006) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16218>, accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

⁶⁷ *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 12 Apr. 1857.

⁶⁸ *Morning Post*, 2 Oct. 1852.

⁶⁹ For the split between Scottish Protectionists and Peelite Conservatives, see Millar (2001).

anyway, though this opinion was perhaps less moderate and Whiggish than election results indicate.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the politics of the Wigtown District of Burghs contained a great many aspects which make it an interesting case study. The character and background of its MPs suggest that those with aristocratic connections and landholdings in the surrounding county of Wigtownshire were the only type of Liberal who could achieve success. However, as in the case of George Young, a lack of landed connections could be excused, provided the candidate held a position which enabled them to dispense significant amounts of patronage. Landed magnates, most prominently the earls of Stair, effectively set the bounds of constituency politics – without their influence over the tenantry, who made up the majority of electors, it was almost impossible for a candidate to win the seat. This factor was bolstered by the application of various means of influence – intimidation to a limited extent, but mostly the offer of employment, or of other financial incentives. The small number of electors were well-compensated for their votes, especially when elections were contested. The period also saw the rise of political parties as a force in the constituency, undertaking the work of canvassing, influencing, and attending to the electoral registers. While party was of increasing importance, however, it had not overtaken that of landed authority by 1868.

The Edinburgh Liberal Duncan Maclaren, when making a speech on the eve of the Second Reform Act, asserted that ‘the Wigtown Burghs – [were] small, rotten, nomination burghs – in the hands of the Earl of Stair’.⁷⁰ In fact, it may have been unique in this regard – the Conservative candidate in 1868, Robert Vans Agnew, agreed to stand because a requisition to him from local electors stated that they ‘could no longer submit to be members of a constituency which was the only nomination burgh constituency in Scotland’, and therefore wished to ‘throw off the stigma’.⁷¹ It would appear that, even to contemporaries, the Wigtown Burghs appeared particularly undemocratic.

Nevertheless, George Young was likely correct in stating that ‘The Liberal party was in possession of every burgh in Scotland, and the non-electors might well be satisfied with that state of matters’.⁷² Even if the effects of the landed magnates were entirely removed, the constituency, like every other burgh district in Scotland, would almost certainly have returned Liberal candidates. The type of Liberal candidates, however, may have been less likely to hail from elite or rural backgrounds, and more towards the Radical end of the ideological spectrum. Given the massive change in the character of the constituency brought about by Reform, it would be unfair to characterise the Wigtown Burghs as completely unchanged – party politics were on this rise, and the affiliation of MPs (broadly) coincided with public opinion among the electorate. Nevertheless, when compared to other Scottish constituencies, which possessed larger electorates, and a greater independence from influence, it was perhaps the least open constituency in Scotland. Overall, the political culture of the Wigtown Burghs (and perhaps Burgh District constituencies more generally) was curiously liminal. Caught between the more independent and ideology-driven political culture of the larger single

⁷⁰ *Scotsman*, 25 Jul. 1868

⁷¹ *Scotsman*, 5 Sep. 1868

⁷² *Glasgow Herald*, 14 Apr. 1865.

burghs, and influence-driven political culture of many Scottish counties. Not big enough to escape the effects of elite influence, Wigtown was nevertheless possessed sufficient autonomy to ensure that these elites were Liberal. This, with a handful of isolated exceptions, was true of all Scottish Burgh District elections of the era.

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